

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Indian migrants an overview of the first and second waves

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Date of Submission: 26-03-2022

Date of Acceptance: 06-04-2022

I. Introduction:

The abrupt breakout of COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on India's economy. Migrant workers have been disproportionately impacted by the crisis in terms of job losses and income, as well as exposure to and infection with COVID-19. During times of crisis, migrant workers are more vulnerable to unemployment than native-born workers. Following the implementation of the lockdown, an estimated 10 million migrant laborers returned to their home countries in 2020. India, the world's second most populous country and a developing market, saw its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fall by 7.3 percent in the fiscal years 2020–2021, marking the largest drop in Indian GDP in history.

A decrease in the rate of economic growth has a clear influence on all sectors of the economy. The informal sector has been severely impacted as a result of the rigorous lockdown and quarantine procedures. India has relied heavily on migrant laborers for industrial and construction activities. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), 2 billion people work in informal occupations worldwide, accounting for 62% of all employees. In low-income nations, 90 percent of employees are employed informally, whereas in middle-income and high-income countries, 67 percent and 18 percent of employees are employed informally, respectively (ILO 2020a). COVID-19 has a negative influence on the economy, especially on people who work in the informal sector. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), COVID-19 had a substantial impact on 1.6 billion workers in the informal sector, resulting in a 60% decline in worldwide revenue (ILO 2020b). Increased unemployment and underemployment rates, as well as large-scale economic restructuring, are further COVID-19-related consequences (ILO 2020a). During the pandemic, 436 million informal businesses, including 111 million in manufacturing, 51 million in lodging and food, and 42 million in other industries, are projected to be hard hit by the economy (ILO 2020b).

A statewide lockdown in India to prevent the spread of COVID-19 has left thousands of migrant workers jobless, homeless, and hungry, forcing them to return to their villages in large numbers. Thousands of migrant workers walking with their children on major highways across India have exposed our society's flaws (Rajiv Ranjan, 2021). Government-imposed efforts to combat the epidemic, such as travel restrictions, lockdowns, and social isolation, had negative consequences for people's lives and businesses. During the COVID-19 crisis, migrants working in the informal sector and illegal migrants are particularly vulnerable to economic loss and hardship. According to government statistics, there are more than 30 million Indians working overseas, with over 9 million of them concentrated in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) area (ILO, 2018). As a result of the economic crisis, an estimated 88–115 million people have been plunged back into extreme poverty (World Bank, 2020a).

In general, the COVID-19 problem had an impact on both international and domestic migration in India. Many overseas migrants have returned to India, mainly from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. For example, India, for example, has returned nearly 6,00,000 stranded migrants using special aircraft and ships. It has impacted migrant home states, like Kerala, where 440,000 people have returned, placing a strain on household budgets and health facilities (World Bank, 2020b)

Impact of the Pandemic on Migrants:

Second Wave vs. First Wave Last year, the lockdown forced the shutdown of economic activity, jeopardizing millions of employees' livelihoods as well as their access to food, housing, and other necessities. Migrant laborers were the worst hurt. According to official estimates (Lok Sabha Unstarred Questions No. 174), nearly 10.4 million migrant laborers went home during the last lockdown. Because real-time information on migrants is lacking, it is impossible to assess the potential impact of the second wave of COVID-19 infections

on migrants. However, the data from the first wave may provide useful information for reducing the harmful effects of the second wave. Gulati et al. (2021) used a survey of 2,917 migrants in six states—Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal—to look at the impact of the epidemic on migrant laborers. The study discovered that the abrupt application of the statewide lockdown had a significant influence not just on employment, but also on the migrants' incomes and savings once they arrived in their settlements. Migrants' family incomes plummeted by 85 percent in June–August 2020 in their home country due to a lack of suitable work prospects. With the recovery of economic activity following the lockdown, the survey indicated that by February 2021, 63.5 percent of migrants had returned (re-migrated) to their destination places, while 36.5 percent remained in their original communities.

Despite the fact that migrant household income grew following remigration, it nevertheless fell by 7.7% compared to the pre-lockdown level. Migrants who stayed in their home country after the shutdown saw their family income fall by more than 82 percent when compared to before the shutdown. These migrant workers, who bore the brunt of the epidemic, had clearly not entirely recovered from their ordeals of the previous year. The emergence of the second wave, as well as the resulting lockdowns in numerous states, would have aggravated their vulnerabilities even more. Migrant laborers have begun to re-migrate to cities and metropolitan regions as lockdown restrictions in various states have been gradually lifted. The most recent figures from the MGNREGA website also show a continued decline in the number of person days created, which decreased from 371.9 million in May 2021 to 283 million in June 2021, indicating a rebound in industrial activity. According to the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy (CMIE), unemployment in India fell from 11.9 percent to 9.2 percent between May and June 2021. However, the extent to which migrants will be able to engage in any economic activity after they return will be determined by the rate of economic recovery.

The central government has unveiled a slew of stimulus measures aimed at reviving the economy and alleviating the problems that the vulnerable populace is experiencing as the epidemic resurfaces. From May to November 2021, 80 million people protected by the National Food Security Act (NFSA) received an additional 5 kg of subsidized food grains through the Public Distribution System (PDS). The total cost of the stimulus package announced by the government during the second wave is around Rs 6.29 lakh crore, which includes a food subsidy of Rs 93,869 crore under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY), an additional fertilizer subsidy of Rs 14,775 crore, and a government guarantee for loans to banks and microfinance institutions. Because of the government's economic caution, most of the aid and relief measures for the poor that were announced last year have been omitted. This might exacerbate the migrant workers' predicament, especially if inflation remains high. More than just alleviation measures, the government must intervene to prevent distressed migration by developing large-scale job possibilities, particularly in the eastern state. Furthermore, a local platform at the Gram Panchayat level may be established to register and link these employees with businesses, allowing them to work closer to their homes. Again, the scope of acceptable labor might be expanded to include a wider spectrum of skilled and unskilled migrants. Importantly, entitlement portability and social safety nets must be addressed promptly, whether through cash-for-food or grain-in-kind via the "One-nation, one-ration card" plan, health insurance and treatment at any location, or a national social security programme for the most disadvantaged. Finally, any effective policy design and execution will require the creation of a periodic database on migrant labor, perhaps every five years.

II. Conclusion:

Migrant workers in the informal economy are particularly exposed to the crisis. Due to COVID-19, Indian migrant workers have experienced several difficulties, with work sites being closed as a result of the country's lockdown measures, affecting their livelihood. The "Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan" (Poor Welfare Employment Campaign) has been declared for internal migrant workers in India; however, there is no corresponding programme for international migrants. The government must offer minimal income assistance to migrants and their families who rely on daily salaries for survival and do not benefit from any of the government's social welfare programmes introduced during the crisis. It may help both the state government and the migrants at the destination if the government provides health insurance systems for migrants, especially during an epidemic or pandemic. It also aids the government in keeping track of migrants who are eligible for health insurance. A large number of migrants have returned to their home countries, and if they do not return to their previous jobs, the government should take steps to provide returnees with employment prospects in the domestic labor market.

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Chintha yalla swamy. "The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Indian migrants an overview of the first and second waves." *IOSR Journal of Economics and Finance (IOSR-JEF)*, 13(02), 2022, pp. 23-25.